

WAITING FOR GODOT

By Samuel Beckett
In Association with Dramatists Play Service

Fort Worth Community Arts Center

Directed by Seth Johnston
Stage Manager—Lyndi Wade
Production Manager-Jason Leyva
Set Design-Jason Leyva
Sound Op-Time Fetters
Light Op and Design-Bryan Douglas
Sound Design-Jason Leyva
Costume Design-Jason Leyva
Producer-Jason Leyva & The Arts Center
Associate Produces-The Arts Council of Fort Worth

CAST

Vladimir (Didi)-Bert Pigg*
Estragon (Gogo)-Shawn Gann
Pozzo-Jason Leyva
Lucky-Zach Leyva
The Boy-Andrew Cave

*Member of Actor's Equity Association

Reviewed Performance: 3/23/2019

Reviewed by Ann Saucer, Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett, is a famous work originally performed in the 1950's. It is commonly interpreted as raising existential questions regarding the meaning of life, death, and God. The Arts Council of Fort Worth selected Waiting for Godot as its first in house production: An excellent choice. The first rate cast and adroit direction and staging bring Beckett's weighty themes and philosophical dialogue to frequently comic life. For more than one reason, I highly recommend that you do not miss the Arts Council's

inaugural production.

Immediately the audience is presented with a bleak dystopian landscape. A skeletal tree, branches jutting in the shape of a cross, is the only landmark. Rocks, platforms, and even the black box walls all come into play as the action unfolds. The pre-show and intermission soundtrack is appropriately eerie; underwater violins is the only way I can describe it.

Waiting for Godot is subject to more than one interpretation. It is a dark humor version of a buddy play. The performances of the extraordinarily talented Bert Pigg and Shawn Gann were evocative of Abbott and Costello and Laurel and Hardy.

The play, taken literally rather than metaphorically, presents a circumstance more relatable in the Twentieth Century (at least to Westerners). Although the apparent intent was to divorce the play from a specific time and place, Didi (Pigg) and Gogo (Gann) could be analogous to “hobos” in the Great Depression or refugees in Europe displaced by the horrors of World War II. As the play progresses, it is revealed that they are homeless, do not know whose land they are on, and are unfamiliar with and scared of their hostile setting. At the same time, their dialogue references times when things were better, and they are wearing ratty and decrepit clothes that were once nice suits. We learn that Didi and Gogo have been friends for fifty years.

A core question is: Who or what is the titular Godot for whom they wait? Literally, he is a prospective employer for two out-of-work men who wait seemingly in vain for him to appear at a landmark tree. Godot also is a metaphor for God, death, and/or the unknown future.

Beckett is darkly comic, but he doesn't do “feel good.” Humans are apes and in our existence we decay incrementally. “Nothing to be done,” and “I can't go on,” are repeated lines. The play is also rich in philosophical dialogue – much more than I can quote here. One representative exchange is Gogo asking Didi whether they always find something “to give us the impression we exist?” Didi responds that “yes, we're magicians.” Some of the dialogue is poetry: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light an instant, then it's night once more.”

The characters of Didi and Gogo smell bad (we are told; don't worry). Didi has bad breath and Gogo's swollen feet smell (“There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the fault of his feet.”). Gogo has an impaired memory.

He says he “puked my puke of a life here,” even though the two had enjoyed happier times. Gogo has to be reminded by Didi what happened the day before. Gogo and Didi clearly suffer physically, but as the play progresses their suffering is more psychological.

As Gogo, Shawn Gann displays a marvelous talent for slapstick (seriously, I hope he doesn’t hurt himself). I cannot recall the last time I saw slapstick of this caliber – maybe never. His antics are hilarious. He fights with his boot, falls over in more than one direction, runs straight into walls, and violates universally accepted principles of hygiene with two chicken bones (what could I possibly mean? You have to see it to find out).

As a soulful Didi, the marvelous Bert Pigg exemplifies great acting. You really believe Didi is in pain. His gastrointestinal difficulties provide some laughs, thanks to clever sound effects, but I found myself wincing watching Pigg walk; you can almost feel the shooting cramps. In addition to Didi’s suffering, Pigg brings his character’s earnestness, his tender love for Gogo, and his long-suffering patience to light. His lullaby to Gogo unleashes a powerfully expressive singing voice. He also uses his face to comic effect: when ordered to smile, his face is a grimace. When Didi tries to think, it’s even funnier. Pigg also illustrates Didi’s internal world just with his eyes, as for example when Didi searches the landscape.

Jason Leyva is an adorably effusive Pozzo – the only one of the five characters not visibly beset by poverty and rough living. He announces his name with great dramatic and narcissistic fanfare. He has all of the trappings of wealth and is brandishing a formidable and sometimes scary whip, but Leyva is such a skilled actor that you know, right from the beginning, that the bravado is something of the “all hat no cattle” variety. He makes his character’s outrageous behavior and descent into misery believable, and ultimately pitiable. Pozzo as a character illustrates the loss of material goods and senses that comes with the passage of time; his character arc is one reason to interpret the work as a metaphor for aging and the inexorable advance of death.

Pozzo abuses his slave, ironically named “Lucky,” played by real-life son Zach Leyva. The staging is remarkable, particularly the way that Jason Leyva brandishes his whip and Lucky’s rope.

Lucky is silent with the exception of a wildly tricky monologue, which he

delivers at the speed of an auctioneer. It's a powerful and poignant performance. Lucky is at the mercy of the tide of intellectual words, and Zach does a good job portraying a character overrun by his own knowledge. I interpret this as an illustration of why book learning is futile in saving mankind from its inherently brutish nature—or, depending on how you interpret the problem, saving mankind from the ennui, or perhaps even terror, of our futile existence.

Which is not to say that Beckett is an anti-intellectual. No, nothing really saves these characters from the hell that is waiting to die. To distract themselves, Didi and Gogo try shooting the dozens (i.e., trading verbal insults), imitation games, eating, contemplating suicide, song, sleep, trading hats, reminiscing on their past, among many other diversions – nothing fully delivers them from their ennui and pain. And yet, they find great solace in each other.

Andrew Cave is charming as the thankless young emissary of Godot, appropriately cowed by Didi's impatient questions.

The lighting illuminates the characters and action while at the same time suggesting an unrelenting, overcast pallor. The moon magically makes an appearance, and this interruption of the gloom is glorious. The costumes are perfect down to the last detail. Visually, the rips and holes in Gogo's and Didi's once fine suits tell the story of their fall from material grace. Pozzo's finery hints at a ring master, but not too much.

You should stop reading this and just buy a ticket. If you are a Beckett fan, you know your chances are limited and you do not want to miss a good production. If you have never seen a Beckett play, then you need to correct that glaring omission in your theater experience. A theater fan not having ever seen Beckett is like a fan of live vocals never going to the opera, where you are going to hear the best trained singers on the planet.

Samuel Beckett's work is like that. Someone can be a movie star based on their looks. If you are a dancer with a gorgeous voice, you can star in musicals. You don't have to be a serious actor – by which I mean able to transmogrify your entire being into someone else entirely and scoop your guts out in a room full of strangers – to be a movie or musical star. In contrast, there is no place for mediocre actors to hide in a Beckett play. A Beckett production is the opportunity to see true actors at the top of their game, because that is what the material demands.

Also, Samuel Beckett is an extraordinarily influential playwright, and Waiting for Godot is probably his most famous work. The Kitchen Dog Theater in Dallas was named after it, and I am told that the Undermain Theater started with a production of Beckett's Endgame.

Finally, the phenomenally intense and exquisitely honed performances are not to be missed. These men hit it out of the park.

Waiting for Godot

A production of the Fort Worth Community Arts Center

in association with Dramatists Play Service

Hardy & Betty Sanders Theatre in the Fort Worth Community Arts Center

1300 Gendy Street, Fort Worth, TX 76107

March 24-31, 2019, for tickets go to [Bit.ly/WaitingForGodotFWCAC](https://bit.ly/WaitingForGodotFWCAC) or call 817 738-1938.

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